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# Commentary on Dale Hample's "Consensus, Dissensus, and a Third Way, Learned Ignorance"

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## 1. IMPLICIT COMMITMENT TO CONSENSUS?

Dale Hample does argumentation scholars a great service by trying to supplement the dichotomy between consensus and dissensus.

But is Hample simply saying that there is a third end state to argument besides consensus and dissensus, namely learned ignorance? Or is he saying that besides the only natural, satisfying end state, consensus, there is also learned ignorance? That would imply that dissensus is *not* a natural, satisfying end state. In fact Hample seems to suggest that when he says:

we worry about the consequences of being unresolved. [...] we always notice that the argument has not run its theoretically proper course, and is in some important way unfinished. The aim of argument, its desired end state, is understood to be consensus.

I am all for Hample's introduction of learned ignorance on the scene, but before we get to that I will question his suggestion that scholars are almost universally committed to consensus as the natural end state of argument. To be sure, this commitment to consensus as the end and aim of argument is explicit, e.g., in the pragma-dialectical endeavour; however, Hample also says that this commitment is explicit in, e.g., Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969). But is an arguer's aim to create or increase inherence in his or her audience the same thing as the joint aim of two arguers to reach consensus with each other? That assumption slips by too easily.

Hample goes on:

Implicit commitment [to consensus] is apparent in the many conceptualizations of argumentation's purpose: to persuade, to enhance knowledge, or to promote democracy, for instance."

But for thinkers who study the role of rhetoric and argument in democracy, this is a half-truth. True enough, Habermas (1997) has a basic belief that rational discourse will lead to consensus, or at least towards it. This probably has to do with the fact that Habermas's fundamental move was to define truth and rightness, not as something metaphysical out there, but as something that emerges in discourse: truth and rightness is that on which

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rational discourse will converge. So, when Habermas and a Habermasians consider argumentative discourse, they have to assume that it will indeed lead to consensus; in order to define the true and the right as the consensus that emerges in rational discourse one must presuppose that consensus will indeed emerge. Nicholas Rescher has questioned what he sees as the circularity of Habermasian “discourse ethics”: “if we put rationality and morality into consensuality, then it is an unsurprising—but uninformative—result that we get rationality and morality out of consensuality” (1993, 20). But today this is far from being the general view among democracy theorists. Amy Gutmann, Chantal Mouffe, and John Dryzek, in different ways, are some of the leading thinkers on democracy who are decidedly not committed to consensus is the natural end state to argument in democracy.

## 2. TUNNEL VISION IN ARGUMENTATION THEORY

I will go a step further. Hamble’s belief that commitment to consensus is near-universal in the argumentation community suggests to me a kind of theoretical tunnel vision in large sectors of that community.

I believe the main reason Hamble and others think this is that they tend automatically to overlook arguments that are about what to do, so-called practical arguments; or, if they do consider them they try to fit them into the mould of theoretical arguments. They forget that in practical argument, there are typically two people who want different things done—one may want to raise taxes, the other to cut taxes, or one may want us to elect Mr. X for president while the other want us to elect Mr. Y. So there is dissensus, but there is generally nowhere to go to decide who is right, and whose claim is the true or acceptable one. We are talking about choice here, and as Aristotle says, “choice is not true or false” (*Eudemian Ethics*, 1226a). So the dissensus will not necessarily be resolved by discourse. The arguers will continue to want different things done. Some of the third parties who listen to the argument may change their views, but among them too dissensus will persist. Eventually, in a democracy, the issue may be decided by vote, but that is not consensus. The continuing dissensus should not, from the argumentation scholar’s point of view, be seen as “disappointment or avoidance.” This is simply the nature of the case when people who want different things done need to make practical decisions together. Public argument will hopefully enlighten those who are to vote, and sometimes a compromise may be found; but to say that “the argument has not run its theoretically proper course” when dissensus persists over practical decisions is academic tunnel vision. It is to believe that any argument will in principle proceed as the one in Plato on how to construct a square twice the size of another square. About this there is one truth which will emerge in rational dialogue, and if dissensus persists, the argument is certainly “in some important way unfinished.” What I call tunnel vision in argumentation scholarship is the implicit assumption that all arguments are in principle like that.

So before going to Nicholas of Cusa for help to show that consensus is not the only steady end state of argument, Hamble might have pointed out that arguments starting and ending in dissensus are all around us because enduring dissensus is the natural and steady state of things for some kinds of argument. It is only in the argumentation community that this insight is slow to percolate. Philosophers outside

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logic and theoretical argumentation scholarship have developed it for decades. Isaiah Berlin (1958) shaped the idea of “value pluralism”: the insight that each individual harbours a plural set of values, which may collide on specific issues, so that even two people holding the same values may find themselves in dissensus, depending on which of the colliding values they prioritize. Carl Wellman (1971) defined “conductive reasoning” as ethical or practical arguments with several independently relevant reasons on both sides, so that individuals may choose either side. Robert Fogelin (1985) argued for the existence of deep disagreements, where rational solutions could not be expected. John Rawls pointed out that there are certain unavoidable sources of disagreement even between reasonable people; he called these sources “the burdens of reason” (1989), or “the burdens of judgment” (1993). Many other moral and political philosophers in our time have noted that our everyday lives are full of dilemmas and issues on which consensus cannot be expected to emerge even from thorough and rational argument, yet we should not see them as unfinished or disappointing. For example, Richard Feldman (2005) has replied to Fogelin’s claim about deep disagreements which allow of no rational resolution by saying that of that suspension of judgment in such cases is precisely the rational response:

whatever one’s inclinations, it is often true that no rational resolution of the issue is available. Suspension of judgment is in fact called for. We need not hide this fact from our students. It is a truth revealed by critical thinking” (2005, 22).

In short, the idea that the end point of an argument beginning in dissensus should be consensus is one that has been challenged by many contemporary thinkers, and it is brought home to us if we consider to all those arguments in our daily lives where we discuss decisions based on values.

Not only is dissensus accepted as natural by many philosophers as well as by ordinary people. It should also be added that much attention is currently focused on other outcomes to debate and argument besides consensus or continued dissensus. “Metaconsensus” is term suggested by the political theorist John Dryzek (e.g., 2004) to describe a state where debaters realize that there is something they share, although they do not agree on what is to be done. They may, for example, find that they have some of the same values (“normative metaconsensus”), although they prioritize or interpret them differently; and such mutual recognition may pave the way for more constructive debate and maybe for compromise. This questions Hample’s claim that “our literature seems to admit only two theoretically interesting circumstances, consensus and dissensus,” at least if we look outside the circle of self-professed argumentation scholars.

### 3. TRANSCENDENCE

Coming now finally to “learned ignorance” or “transcendence,” I welcome this addition to our vocabulary. I believe that what we need is more thinking about different *types* of transcendence. The kind exemplified by Cusa’s thinking seems to me a very radical kind, where the two terms in an opposition are both seen to be meaningless and paradoxical. The new third term is then one that outright abolishes both original terms but which cannot itself be expressed in words. I am reminded here of some of the basic insights of modern physics and cosmology, where for example, the empirical properties of light

cannot be explained if it is considered to be either a wave or a particle; it can be explained only when light is considered to be both, although they seem to contradict each other. I am also reminded of Wittgenstein, who wrote that the aim of philosophy is “to shew the fly out of the fly-bottle” (1953, 309); in other words, to abandon the very concepts which made us behave like a philosophical fly in a bottle. Does Cusa makes us any wiser on these kinds of transcendence, or should Cusa the argumentation theorist fall prey to his theological colleague William of Occam’s proverbial razor? Be that as it may, Hampe’s more mundane examples of transcendence certainly deserve our attention; however, they hardly illustrate the mind-blowing dissolution of all opposites extolled by Cusa, but rather an interesting range of *types* of transcendence. So let us all give more attention to the various ways in which dissenting standpoints in argument may be transcended. I have said that some kinds of dissensus is not unfinished business and not disappointment; but on the other hand, transcendence of dissensus can certainly be very satisfying.

[Link to paper](#)

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